

Two Augustines?

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Beyond the decision to keep what Christians call the Old Testament, probably the only positive Christian contribution to Jewish-Christian relations from the patristic era was Augustine's "witness doctrine." Its claim was that the dispersion of the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE was not simply punishment for their "rejection" of Jesus, but also had a more positive role in God's plan. Bearing their (biblical) books wherever they were forced to wander, they bore witness to the nations of the truth of Christianity by the prophetic content of the books (which they failed to understand), while the Jewishness of the books proved that Christians had not fabricated them. Augustine could then read Psalm 58:12 (59:12 in our modern bibles), "Slay them not..." as God's or Christ's command not to harm Jews physically and to let them live as Jews; their continuing existence as Jews (until their ultimate conversion at the end of time) fulfilled a divine purpose. Bolstered by the inherited precedent of Roman law, and with the authority of Augustine behind it, the teaching helped to preserve Jewish lives and Judaism itself for centuries. Anyone who knows the precarious situation of Jews and Judaism in medieval Europe knows what might well have happened otherwise. We cannot but be grateful that worse was avoided.

Paula Fredriksen's contribution in the book under discussion is to show when and how Augustine arrived at his position. But her achievement goes beyond this. She situates Augustine's thinking on this matter in the context of early Christian history and Christian anti-Judaism prior to him. Further, she is rightly insistent that anti-Judaism was not the whole story: there were individual friendships, urban social mingling, Christians visiting Jewish synagogues and joining in Jewish celebrations, all contrary to the wishes—indeed the legislation—of the leadership on both sides. She reinforces her case for Augustine's contribution with an astute discussion of his correspondence with the far less

accommodating Jerome (on the legitimacy of the Jewish practices of the earliest followers of Jesus) and with a cogent presentation of what the bishop does *not* say on the use of force against Jews (as compared to his approval of it against Donatists). Nor, as she points out, does he say a word about the forced conversion of the Jews on Minorca in 418—an event he had to have known about and which certain of his Christian colleagues celebrated. Finally, she makes no effort to hide Augustine's own anti-Jewish rhetoric.

My part in this conversation will be to express some reservations, not at all about Fredriksen, but about Augustine. In a project on the fate or “after-life” of the *Ioudaioi* (usually translated “the Jews”) of John's gospel at the hands of several early Christian writers, I found Augustine as antagonistic as any of the writers I have examined (Efroymson 1999, with full documentation on what follows on Augustine on John).

Augustine produced 124 homilies (*tractatus*) on John's gospel; fully 60 of them contain noticeable anti-Jewish material, and between 15 and 17 are extensively or completely taken up with it. Perhaps the most striking thing about the Johannine Jews in Augustine's hands is the sheer number and variety of crimes, vices, and other evils with which he characterizes them and the extent to which this practice pervades the homilies. Some 57 homilies have at least one dose of this anti-Jewish rhetoric, and frequently far more. We hear of the Jews' carnality, pride and impudence, envy, lies and calumnies, and culpable blindness; more generally, their *infidelitas* (both unfaithfulness and a refusal to believe), sinfulness, wickedness, and perversity. He is emphatic about their hatred of Jesus and their “raging” against him. Altogether, there are 250 such references.

In addition, there are some 60 further passages, in 29 homilies, referring to “the Jews” (rarely: “leaders,” etc.) having killed, crucified, or having sought to slay Jesus. An important aspect of this last set of charges is the contexts in which they appear. A third of them occur in homilies 112–118, which cover the trial and death of Jesus in John's gospel. Another 15 appear in earlier homilies, commenting on references in the gospel to the Jews persecuting or seeking to kill Jesus. Some 23—over a third—appear, however, in homilies on gospel passages having no bearing on either Jesus' death or any effort to bring it about. For exam-

ple, at the end of John 3, commenting on Jesus' hidden authority, the bishop says: "What the disciples saw, who loved him, that the Jews also saw, who crucified him" (Homily 14.12). At John 12:21, where Jesus is told that "some Greeks" wanted to see him: "See how the Jews wish to kill him, the Gentiles, to see him" (H 51.8).

The role of John's gospel itself in this ugliness is far from negligible. In the gospel, the *Ioudaioi* frequently criticize, attack, and seek to kill Jesus. At least as often, and almost as fiercely, Jesus criticizes and denounces them. And the author or narrator takes his own turn in disparagement of the Jews. Augustine, of course, believed that Jesus said and did what John had narrated, and that the Jews said and did what John had accused them of saying and doing. He is angry about it and expresses that anger in these homilies. Is Augustine, then, merely a "victim" of John's portrayal of the *Ioudaioi*? There is almost certainly more to it than that. Let us move on to other biblically-oriented material.

We have now, after some recent discoveries, 569 of Augustine's sermons, on biblical passages as well as on various kinds of liturgical celebrations (Epiphany, Easter, saints' feasts, and more). Anti-Jewish references or assertions have found their way into some 154 of the sermons. They tend to be less extensive than those in the Homilies on John, sometimes only a sentence or two, but often more. But given Augustine's reputation by the time he became a bishop, people came to listen to him preach and would not likely have missed many of his words.

Here again, references to the Jews killing or crucifying Jesus merit special attention. The assertion appears in 68 of these sermons, not a high percentage. Thirteen of these references come from Easter season sermons, one on Isaiah 53 and one on Samson's sacrificing his own life. Thus, references to Jesus' crucifixion are not surprising. Beyond the "unsurprising" 15, however, every one of the remaining such accusations is completely gratuitous: on the Feast of the Epiphany, on the Good Shepherd, on the judgment of Solomon between the two harlots, and far more. In Sermon 214.3, on the handing over of the creed to catechumens, he notes the great good conferred on us through the crucifixion of Jesus but insists that God achieved it through and despite the malice of the Jews (and the devil); the Jews

deserve not reward but punishment, as their will was to do harm. More dramatically, in Sermon 136.4, on the healing of the man born blind in John 9, commenting on the argument about who can see and who is blind:

The defenders of the law, teachers of the law, intellectual masters of the law, crucified the author of the law! What blindness! ... He was not recognized by the Jews, he was crucified by the Jews.... Becoming more hardened than ever, becoming blind, those who boasted they could see the light, they crucified the light. What colossal blindness!

The most extensive block of Augustine's reflections on biblical material is the set of 208 "expositions" (*enarrationes*) on the 150 psalms. We encounter anti-Jewish material in 93 of the 208, generally longer than those in most of the sermons; the list of crimes and vices roughly parallels that found in the Homilies on John. There are 97 references to, or accusations of, the Jews killing or crucifying Jesus. They occur in 54 of the expositions, sometimes several separate times in one exposition. This could seem puzzling until one notes that Augustine has in these expositions brought to a kind of summit the patristic tradition of reading the psalms as "Christian," which is to say as spoken typically by, to, or about Christ. Thus the Jews who are castigated tend to be Jews contemporary with Jesus. If the psalmist is ridiculed, it is "really" Jesus being ridiculed on the cross; laments are the laments of Jesus about the suffering imposed on him by the Jews; a cry for justice is a cry for the punishment of the Jews who had crucified him, and so on.

Is there anything characteristically Augustinian in all this? There are a few possibilities: his fondness for the blinding "veil" of 2 Cor. 3:15, for example, and his predilection, in all three blocks of material, to use Rom. 10:3 (the Jews' "attempting to establish their own righteousness" and "not submitting to God's") as a divinely-sanctioned and empirical description of how "Jews" operate. But perhaps the most striking is Augustine's emphasis, especially in his later preaching and writing, on the power, the omnipotence, of God. What God wants done gets done, and what does not get done is the result of God not wanting it done. This takes a funny turn in some gospel passages. When Jesus prays from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), Augustine is clear about *which Jews* Jesus is

praying for: “Among the many hostile people, he saw [from the cross] some of his own [*quosdam suos*]; *for them* he sought pardon [*illis jam petebat veniam*]” (Homily on John 31.9). Later, in Homily on John 38.7: “Among that people by whom he was crucified..., there were [future] members of Christ *for whom* he said ‘Father, forgive them....’” (See also Sermon 229E.1.) Finally, and more generally, in Homily on John 47.4, on John 10:14 and 15 (“I know mine...”), Augustine claims that Jesus was sent not to the Jews generally, but only to the Jews who would ultimately accept him. This (later) Augustine cannot have Jesus pray for forgiveness for those who he believes will not accept it, nor can he have God send Jesus in vain. Otherwise neither God nor Jesus is in control. Characteristically Augustine, indeed.

Are there then two Augustines? I will first repeat that Fredriksen’s Augustine is no fabrication. He is a towering, maybe even a courageous theologian who, out of his own resources and his biblical reflections and against the current, was able to re-imagine the relationship of God and Israel and find a positive role in God’s plan for Jews and Judaism. Augustine thereby almost certainly helped to prevent persecution and forced conversions, saving lives in medieval Europe in the process. Further, Fredriksen has some real wisdom to offer on how difficult it is, maybe even impossible, to get at what a skilled rhetorician like Augustine “really thought” or “really felt,” and the importance of context and intent in seeing the differences in the “rhetorical Jews” he constructs, e.g., between those in the Homilies on John and those in *Against Faustus* (Fredriksen 2002, 261; 307).

Nevertheless, the anti-Judaism is also real, and, because this material (the *Tractatus* on John, the *Enarrationes*, and the Sermons) tends to be neglected in histories and studies of early Christian anti-Judaism, it is imperative to point to it. Augustine is too important, and these works are too weighty, for them to continue to be overlooked. At the very least, they can serve as a warning about the critical care with which John’s Gospel and the “Christian” reading of the psalms should be treated.

One last point (by way of “concession”?): if Augustine had not written or preached a word of such obloquy, the Christian anti-Jewish tradition would still be there. If, on the other hand, he had not in-

troduced the witness doctrine, the history of medieval Jewry would almost certainly have been far more tragic.¹

Note

1. It may be useful to mention here that one can find a welcome account of the way some heavyweight medieval theologians handled the witness doctrine in Jeremy Cohen's *Living Letters of the Law* (1999), as well as an interesting earlier analysis of why he thought it did not survive the onslaught of the Friars (1982). The influence of the doctrine on papal policy and some attempts to circumvent it are treated passim in the History volume of Shlomo Simonsohn's *The Apostolic See and the Jews* (1991).

References

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